The Fourth Church Pulpit

IDLE TALE - DISBELIEF - EASTER JOY

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Easter Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Isaiah 65: 17-25
Luke 23:50 - 24:12

A woman called the church office and asked to speak with me. It was a matter of some urgency, she said. She was a visitor to the city from out-of-town and needed to speak with the minister of the Fourth Presbyterian Church. I took the call, assuming she was in some distress. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me what time the Easter Parade begins," she said. "Ma'am?" I responded, "the Easter Parade?" "Yes, you know, when all the fancy people parade up and down Michigan Avenue." "Oh," I said, "I don't think there's an actual parade and if there is, I don't believe I know the exact starting time, but we do have Easter services at 7:30, 9:00, and 11:00." "No, no," she said, "I don't want to go to church! I want to see the Easter Parade." And then she explained, "I haven't been to Chicago for years. But I can remember when all the grand people came to the Fourth Presbyterian Church with their finery and lovely hats, and they would stroll down Michigan Avenue and lots of people would come to see them." Without getting in too deeply, I tried to tell her that it's a little different today; the church, the Avenue, and that people don't do that so much anymore; that she might see Nikes and blue jeans — maybe even shorts if its a nice day and, yes, a few wonderful hats. But, I need to warn you. She may be out there, so between now and the end of the service do what you can. Because for someone, you may be the Easter Parade.

There is, of course, a very old tradition of peculiar, and in some ways, wonderfully human behavior on Easter morning, extending all the way back in time to the first Easter. The biblical accounts are full of confusion, people running back and forth, not believing what they are hearing, not believing what they are seeing. If they made this story up, you'd think they'd be a little more consistent, a little more convincing. But, in fact, the way Luke remembers it, nobody believes the women who hurry back to tell the disciples that the tomb is empty.

He died on Friday afternoon. The women watched as he was buried, and then returned on Sunday morning to anoint the body with spices. It is then, in the early light of the first day of the week that the confusion starts; the stone is rolled away, the body is gone, there are young men in shining clothes. The women are terrified; in the half light of dawn they're not sure what they're seeing; a hallucination perhaps? "Why are you looking for him here, among the dead? He is not here, but has risen!"

Frantic, frightened, as anyone would be, they ran, now in the full light of morning, and found the place where the others were hiding and tried to tell them; tried, breathlessly, to put together words and sentences that would somehow communicate a bit of what they had experienced, but which now was already beginning to slip through their fingers. And with utter objectivity, with unvarnished integrity, the writer of this story tells it like it is: "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

How do you like that? Thirty minutes after the fact, and the closest thing we will ever have to eyewitnesses don't even believe it and think it's all an idle tale? I sometimes think that's the most important verse in the Bible. The distinguished American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, himself a very popular preacher, used to turn down invitations to preach on Easter and Christmas; in fact, declined to attend a traditional preaching service. Instead, he always attended a liturgical church, an Episcopal or Roman Catholic cathedral with elaborate ritual and no sermon, in order not to be subjected to some preacher making a fool of himself, trying to explain the resurrection.

It's always been a problem intellectually. James Wall, in his editorial in the *Christian Century* this week, writes about the madness and irrationality of it all. Christmas, Wall says, "is a much easier sell ... Easter is the season that challenges the believer with data that won't compute. The lilies, new clothes, and hidden eggs are not enough to protect us from the reality that we live in a society that looks at the core of our belief system and finds it irrational." [*Christian Century*, 4/12/95].

It is much easier to trivialize, or even malign it, than to take it seriously or intellectually. We cover the cross with daffodils, theologian Douglas John Hall complains. An article on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* yesterday reported that Easter is becoming a major consumer event. How about a CD-weezer to go with chocolate candy and plastic grass, lighted rabbits, rubber eggs, Power Ranger dolls designed to fit in your Easter basket. It is easier to trivialize or malign with bad humor and tasteless caricature.

The latest *New Yorker* arrived this week: *The New Yorker*, whose covers were once so literate and urbane that we used to save and even frame them. This Easter issue displays an Easter bunny in a business suit, crucified on a 1040A Internal Revenue tax form. It made me angry. The most profound mystery of my faith, ridiculed. And then I remembered our text, "it seemed to them an idle tale" and I concluded that *The New Yorker* is simply in very good company; in fact, maybe the best company it has been in since E.B. White died.

There aren't even many good Easter stories. John Updike has written one, "Short Easter", which appears in his most recent book, *The Afterlife and Other Stories.* It is about the oddity of Easter. Its main character is Fogel, a sixty-two-year-old man who is thinking a lot about being sixty-two, the evidences of his own aging, "his body's accumulated failures." It's Easter and he hasn't gone to church.

> "Easter has always struck Fogel as a holiday without real punch. The highlight was a peep into a big sugar egg, paper silhouettes, a thatch-roofed cottage, a rabbit wearing a vest. Generally, the festivity that should have attended the day had fallen rather flat ... "

Fogel's 62nd Easter is a perfectly dismal day; Updike describes his too thorough reading of the paper, a half-hearted attempt to rake the lawn, a pointless brunch he and his wife have been attending on Easter for years, pointless conversation with aging widows, drinking too much, and then falling asleep at home. He dreams of his own long-dead parents, and then reorienting himself after his deep sleep on an Easter afternoon, "Everything seemed still in place, yet something was immensely missing."

What is missing, of course, is any alternative to the grimness, the putting in time, the getting older; any hopeful alteration to what waits for Fogel and all of us. What is missing is what every human being feels deeply in his or her soul ... some sense that human life adds up to something more than a slow process of deterioration. What is missing from Fogel's Easter is the brave affirmation of Resurrection, the hope and joy and irrationality of that earliest Christian Creed, "He is not here, but has risen."

Death, after all, is so much more rational. We're here, we live for awhile, we die.

Last Sunday evening, a fine group of young people, members of our Confirmation Class, were confirmed and became church members. They were responsible for leading the worship service, including the sermon which was actually four short homilies by four of the young people.

It was stunning — a tour de force — and before it was over there wasn't a dry eye in the congregation. I had forgotten how straight and direct our youngsters can be. One of them, Holly Landon, said something so simple and so true no veteran preacher would ever think to say it. Holly said:

> "When our life is over, and we are lying on our deathbed, we probably won't be thinking about our house, or our car, or the boss at work."

I've been pondering that ever since. Holly is absolutely right. And she is in very good theological company. Parker Palmer, Quaker theologian, says that:

> "Every life is lived toward a horizon, a distant vision of what lies ahead. The quality of our life," Palmer proposes, "depends on whether the horizon is dark with death or full of light and life. When we imagine ourselves moving toward the finality of death," Palmer says, "our lives become distorted. We may become driven by fear, obsessed with protecting and preserving what we have which is a sure way of losing it. But when we envision a horizon that includes hope and life we are free to (live) without fear, free to act in trust and love and justice." [*The Active Life*, p. 139].

I think that's true. Our lease on life is short term and because we know that about ourselves we devote much of the time we have been given to holding death, or the thought of death, at bay: striving, struggling, working, building, protecting, preserving, and along the way missing the opportunities to love deeply, to live passionately, to give

ourselves extravagantly.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, Douglas John Hall proposes, is not for the purpose of getting us into heaven, although he has no quarrel with that. Its real purpose is to:

> " ... get us into the world. To bring us fully to life. 'Jesus Saves' — saves us for life. Saves us from the awful habit we have of saving ourselves, of sparing our energies, or protecting our minds and souls and bodies from life's struggles. He saves us for the spend-thriftiness of love, work, and play.." [*Professing the Faith*, p.552].

One who understood and lived it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose life was remembered last Sunday on the 50th anniversary of his death in a Nazi prison. Bonhoeffer was a pastor, theologian, member of the resistance and finally a participant in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He was hanged a few weeks before the end of the war. His *Letters and Papers From Prison* were smuggled out by a sympathetic guard. To his parents, on March 27, 1944, just before Easter, he wrote:

> "It's a year now since I actually heard a hymn. There are only a few pieces I know well enough to be able to always hear inwardly. But I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns." And then, "speaking of Easter, do we not attach more importance these days to the act of dying than death itself? We are much more concerned with getting over the act of dying than with being victorious over death."

As I read those words again this year, I realized that what Bonhoeffer was doing was trying again, as we all do on this day, to find words big enough for a truth that exceeds the power of words alone to carry it. A truth bigger than our logical arguments.

Bonhoeffer concluded:

> "What tremendous difference it would make if a few people really believed and acted upon that. To live in the light of the resurrection — that is the meaning of Easter." [*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 154].

He, of course, was one who did, who so lived in light of the resurrection, that his life and death have become for us testimony to the truth. On April 9, 1945, as the guards led him away, he said to a fellow prisoner; "This is the end, for me, the beginning of life."

You believe this truth not by tucking all the loose ends into a neat, rational theory, or formula. Someone is always trying to do that, futilely. It can't be done.

No, the evidence of this truth is the lives of men and women in whom it has become a power. The evidence of the resurrection is the lives of women and men who quietly, without fanfare, maybe without their even realizing it, have made the resurrection, hope, life, the organizing principle of their lives.

The evidence is all around us, in the lives of the everyday saints who live, victoriously, not in the shadow of death, but in the light of life:

- the woman with terminal illness, still giving herself to her family.
- the young man, who walks away from the culture of death, and lives in hope, by simply attending school.
- the sophisticated attorney who goes to Cabrini each Thursday to lead a Bible study.

› the man confined to a wheelchair, who even an early April gale in Chicago cannot keep away from his job and his church.

Ordinary men and women who give their lives away instead of hoarding them: who work for the betterment of our community, who serve others, who invest all they have and are in life.

To live in the light of the resurrection, to live toward a horizon of life, not death.

Let me tell you about someone I have come to know recently, albeit from afar. Professor John Carmody, a theologian who teaches religion at Santa Clara University, is critically ill and has written a good book about his struggle with cancer. In a sermon a month ago, I quoted the book. I also made a big mistake. Somewhere, somehow, I thought I had read that Carmody had died, and when I quoted him, I said it. Professor Carmody not only didn't die, he is back at work teaching and writing and has produced another book.

Someone in the congregation knew that, but I didn't receive the correction until printed copies and tapes were in the mail. So I wrote him an embarrassed letter and apologized and told him that like Mark Twain, reports of his demise were greatly exaggerated. And that I would do all I could to correct my error and as penance I would buy three copies of his new book, which I have done.

Yesterday I received a charming note. He said he had a good laugh at the whole escapade; said three books was adequate penance, and wished me a blessed Easter.

He is evidence of life lived in the light of the resurrection. In the new book of prayers, *Psalms for Times of Trouble,* there is one, which for me, as I read it this week, affirmed what every Easter sermon tries to say and ultimately fails, what every glorious Easter worship strives to celebrate with trumpets, flowers, and magnificent hymns, but of necessity, falls short.

Carmody, in the midst of his struggle, looking at his own horizon prays:

"For me to be is to be in you
to feel is to feel toward you
to be quiet is to flow toward your rest ...

If we are in you now
and can come at death to be with you
inseparably
how can any trouble be essential ... "

[p.159].

And so, good friends, look around you and you will see Him in the lives of people who trust Him. Good friends, do live your life as part of God's new creation: whatever your struggle, whatever you fear, whatever you strive for, know that Christ is risen, that God's love is victorious. Do live your precious life toward God's horizon and do live your life in light of the resurrection.

For He is not here. He is risen. Thanks be to God. Amen.